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Active Learning in Japanese University EFL Classes: Clarifying the Construct

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【Abstract】

The term Active Learning (AL) has become somewhat ubiquitous in a range of educational contexts as well as mainstream media. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEXT) appears to be leading the charge and pressure is being put on schools and universities to adopt or promote AL style instruction. In this paper, we attempt to review some of the accepted meanings of AL and offer our interpretations of the construct in our teaching context, university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses in Japan. We offer a brief review of academic literature on the topics of AL, learner engagement, second-language learner motivation and self-determination theory (SDT). We then outline how AL maps onto the content-focused English program at the Hirao School of Management (CUBE), and conclude with some of our emerging perspectives on the construct.

【Keywords】
Active Learning, Learner Engagement, Second-Language Learning Motivation,
Self-Determination Theory

· Hirao School of Management, Konan University
· Hirao School of Management, Konan University

1. Introduction

Active Learning (AL) appears to have become a battle cry by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEXT) and significant pressure is being put on universities throughout Japan to adopt or promote AL. This pressure is also being felt in our institution, Konan University, where the newly established *kyoiku gakushu shien senta* (Learning Utility Center for Konan University Students, or LUCKS) is leading faculty development (FD) initiatives to promote AL school wide. In this seventh volume of the Hirao School of Management Review (HSMR), we would like to step back and examine some of the accepted meanings of AL and offer our interpretations of the construct in our teaching context, university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses in Japan. We start with a review of academic literature on the topic of AL, both generally and for our context, as well as the related topics of learner engagement, second-language (L2) learning motivation and self-determination theory (SDT). We then go on to outline how AL maps onto the content-focused English program at the Hirao School of Management (CUBE), and conclude with some areas for further research.

One aim of this paper is to continue a dialog started in Jones and Palmer (2016) regarding new ways of looking at our craft and new directions in which we hope to further advance the content-focused English language program we have had the honor of helping develop.

2. Literature Review

In this section, we would like to offer a sprinkling of investigations into the topics of AL, learner engagement, second-language learning motivation and self-determination theory. This is not intended as an exhaustive review, but a sampling of how these constructs have been conceptualized and researched. We wish to confess here at the outset that neither of us is fond of the term *active* learning in that it implies that there is also something that can be referred to as *passive* learning. While conceptually some learners might actually retain content or skills they have addressed passively, our experience is that for most people this is only superficial and short-lived.

Despite this aversion to the term *active learning*, we recognize that efforts in this area are well-intended and aimed at better preparing young people for the uncertain futures they will encounter.

2.1 Active Learning

The Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT) at the University of Michigan defines AL as, "a process whereby students engage in activities, such as reading, writing, discussion, or problem solving that promote analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of class content." (CRLT, 2016) The ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate is also discussed by Cummins (1979), who differentiates between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) required for social and conversational situations and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) Skills needed for academic study. While a period of exposure to the target language of only two or three years would be sufficient for BICS, where language learning is contextualized and concomitantly making lower cognitive demands, in the formal and abstract world of academic study a much greater length of exposure (five years or more) would be needed for the learner to harness CALP Skills such as interpreting evidence, justifying opinions or making hypotheses. Whereas concrete tasks can be accomplished by merely identifying information in the process of asking the questions *who* or *what* or *when* or *where*, for abstract tasks involving hypothesizing or reasoning one would need to pose the questions *what if* or *why*. Whenever the students perform a tangible exercise, it can be said to involve Lower Order Thinking Skills, or LOTS, whereas when the work assigned is more conceptual or theoretical in scope, it will entail Higher Order Thinking Skills, or HOTS. Instructional programs seeking to help learners still wrestling with basic skills and stretched by concrete, contextualized tasks, may find that in spite of their best efforts they overwhelm or lose their learners when encouraging them to think 'critically.' It is suggested here that a form of AL which adheres to achievable language learning aims that are not too far above the level of the student, sometimes referred to in the literature as 'i + 1' (Krashen, 1985), is much more likely to succeed.

Some approaches that are viewed as promoting AL include, "cooperative learning, problem-based learning, and the use of case methods and simulations." (CRLT, 2016) When implementing AL in the Japanese EFL context, however, a better understanding of learner needs is essential. An ambitious, well-intentioned program will need to recognize the kind of instructional approaches that students have been exposed to previously. It is one thing to move away from an excessively teacher-centered, narrow form of direct instruction that exists in a number of junior and senior high schools; it is quite another to abandon the scaffolded tasks and well-functioning support structure of those schools and offer an implicit, laissez-faire approach to teaching, typified by minimal guidance in the course of instruction, which has not achieved the educational outcomes often claimed by its adherents (Kirschner, Sweller & Clark, 2006). There is

still the need for explicit teaching, hence the question is which forms of teaching work best with AL, and a more nuanced appreciation of when exactly to implement AL in the teaching cycle. Students cannot be expected to flourish with problem-based or experiential methods until a firm foundation of know-how and skills is in place. That is why the conditions under which AL is attainable have been an area of lively research interest. For example, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Teaching Center (Columbia University, 2016) describes active learning as when learners are (1) mentally involved, (2) engaged in hands-on activities, and/or (3) involved in a process of inquiry, discovery, investigation, and interpretation.

In the school context, Guy Claxton (2007) has spearheaded efforts to shift the focus away from helping students learn to strengthening their "capacity" to learn. He cites Seymore Papert (1998):

> *"All skills will become obsolete except one, the skill of being able to make the right response to situations that are outside the scope of what you were taught in school. We need to produce people who know how to act when they are faced with situations for which they were not specifically prepared."*

Hargreaves (2004) sees teaching at its best as "what teachers do that not only helps students to learn but actively strengthens their capacity to learn." In a related vein, the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP, 2007) states that "effective teaching … should aim to help individuals and groups to develop the intellectual, personal and social resources that will enable them to … flourish … in a diverse and changing world."

These are all lofty goals, and the current push in Japan toward AL seems to derive at least partially from these lines of inquiry. The problem for us though is that these top-down initiatives fail to take into account the ground-level struggles faced by teachers in the implementation stages, i.e. delivery of instruction. One area that we believe must be included in the discussion is the crucial role of learner engagement in any forms of AL.

2.2 Learner Engagement

Research into learner engagement has been conducted extensively in both school and university contexts but an agreed upon definition remains elusive (Chapman, 2003; Parsons & Taylor, 2011). One of the better attempts was provided by Wellborn (1991),

who views engagement as, "the extent of a student's active involvement in a learning activity." Three commonly cited dimensions of engagement are behavioral engagement, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Parsons & Taylor, 2011). There has also been a push to add agentic engagement, or the extent to which a learner tries to enrich a learning experience rather than passively receiving it as is (Reeve, 2012). Conceptually, this type of engagement is a process where learners, "proactively try to create, enhance, and personalize the conditions and circumstances under which they learn." (pg. 161)

Another type of engagement that has been proposed is academic engagement, viewed by Newmann, Wehlage and Lamborn (1992) as, "the student's psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote" (cited in Dunleavy & Milton, 2009).

Csikzentmihalyi's (1990) concept of flow (the subjective state of complete involvement, whereby individuals are so involved in an activity that they lose awareness of time and space) is also described by Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) as providing conceptualization of engagement that represents high emotional involvement or investment. Not surprisingly, we find attempts to assess engagement using criteria from Flow Theory in school settings (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider & Shernoff, 2003; Harmer & Cates, 2007) as well as ESL/EFL contexts (Egbert, 2003).

Researchers have also recognized the social nature of school engagement. Dunleavy and Milton (2009) define social engagement as "a combination of students' sense of belonging at school, their acceptance of the goals of schooling, feelings of being connected to and accepted by peers, and experiences of relationships with adults who 'show interest in them as individuals." (pg. 8)

It is important to distinguish engagement from the related construct of motivation. Reeve (2012) describes the relationship between motivation and engagement as follows:

"The distinction between the two constructs is that motivation is a private, unobservable psychological, neural, and biological process that serves as an antecedent to the publicly observable behavior that is engagement."
(pg. 151)

In practice, distinguishing the two constructs is not so simple in that students might seem disengaged when privately ruminating or processing new information, or conversely seem engaged when their mind or heart is somewhere else. Regardless of the

distinction, we understand the necessity of having a clearer grasp on what drives our learners to persist in their studies of English at university. Having a better handle on learners' motives would help us in any attempts at active learning and engaging them.

2.3 Second-Language (L2) Learning Motivation

One of the most influential early distinctions in L2 learning motivation theory was between instrumental and integrative orientations (Gardner, 1985). Gardner's constructs of integrative and instrumental motivation have been described as related to the more general distinction between intrinsic/extrinsic motivation (Dickinson, 1995). Integrative motivation is described as learning a target language with an eye to interacting with speakers of that language (intrinsic) while instrumental motivation involves learning the language for some external reward such as achieving good grades or getting a good job (extrinsic). Although Gardner (1985) views integrative motivation as stronger than instrumental motivation, there is some evidence that this may not be true in certain contexts such as Japan (Sakui & Gaies, 1999).

Ushioda (2011) discusses a "shift away from individual-cognitive perspectives on motivation towards dynamic perspectives integrating internal, social and contextual processes shaping motivation" and notes a, "move away from achievement-oriented analyses of motivation to identity oriented analyses of personal motivational trajectories." (p. 222) In school contexts, Deakin Crick and Goldspink (2014) synthesized findings from two related studies as well as the broader literature on engagement to confirm the importance of learning identity and learner dispositions, concluding that pedagogical attention in these two areas can boost engagement and attainment.

Dörnyei (2009) brings together important findings related to his L2 Motivational Self System, and highlights some of the pedagogical implications, and takes the position that the ideal and ought selves must be in harmony with each other if they are to have a positive impact on motivation. Higgins (1987) noted early on, "we are motivated to reach a condition where our self-concept matches our personally relevant self-guides." (p. 321). According to this "self-discrepancy" theory (Higgins, 1987), the self is comprised of three self-states: the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self. Higgins (1987) views each of these proposed selves from two standpoints: your own beliefs about yourself, and what others believe about you. How this concept can inform our attempts at AL in our context, however, requires further exploration. One promising area that we have found is the work of Richard Ryan and Edward Deci on SDT,

especially the basic psychological needs they have identified of competence, autonomy and relatedness.

2.4 Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Ryan and Deci (2000) outline how their theories of human motivation have evolved from an emphasis on distinctions between intrinsic and extrinsic types of motivation toward deeper understandings of the social-contextual conditions that, "facilitate versus forestall the natural processes of self-motivation and healthy psychological development." (pg. 68) Two points seem to have particular relevance to our study of active learning and learner engagement. One is the central role played by three basic psychological needs, namely competence, autonomy and relatedness. Another is the recognition that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are part of a continuum which includes several different types of motivation, and that individuals can experience specific endeavors at different points along this continuum based on self-regulated behaviors such as internalization and integration. This second point is key if we recognize that English will not be everyone's cup of tea.

Reeve (2012) reviews the five mini theories that inform SDT (SDT): basic needs theory, organismic integration theory, goal contents theory, cognitive evaluation theory, and causality orientations theory (Appendix). According to Reeve (2012), SDT has moved beyond contrasting intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to a focus on the distinction between autonomous and controlled motivation.

Reeve (2012) believes that each learner's classroom engagement, "is invariably a joint product of his or her motivation and classroom supports versus thwarts," and describes three implications of the view that classroom motivation and engagement are inextricably bound to the teacher and context:

- To flourish, student motivation and engagement need supportive conditions (especially supportive student-teacher relationships).
- The role of the teacher is not to create student motivation or engagement, but to support the motivation and engagement that are already there in a way that promotes high-quality motivation and engagement.
- The relationship between social context, motivation, engagement, and student outcomes is not strictly linear in that these relations need also be viewed as reciprocal. (pg. 152)

This "reciprocal relation" between student motivation and learning environment is described by Reeve (2012) through the lens of a student-teacher dialectical framework within SDT: To the extent that students are able to express themselves, pursue their interests and values, and acquire constructive new sources of motivation, the dialectical outcome of student-teacher interactions will be synthesis, resulting in greater student autonomy, engagement, and well-being. (pg. 157)

One of the key influences on motivation and thus engagement appears to be locus of control, and studies on the importance of agency and autonomy-supportive teaching styles have increased. The question then is how this can actually be achieved in practice.

3. Active Learning and the CUBE English Program

We now turn to a discussion of elements of specific courses in our program which we feel promote active learning. We also attempt to tie these descriptions back into definitions of active learning and ideas related to engagement and motivation. To provide some context for the reader, students in the Management Course have ten required English courses over the first three semesters as follows:

Semester One	Semester Two	Semester Three
Global Challenges (2)	American Studies (2)	Japan Studies (1)
Speech and Discussion (2)	Discussion and Debate (2)	European Studies (1)
CUBE English I (1)	CUBE English II (1)	Business Communication (1)
		Introduction to TOEIC (1)

* Numbers in parentheses indicate how many times these classes meet per week.

We have organized the following discussion around types of activities that we have developed or adopted for our program, namely Student-Led Research, Genre Approach to Writing Instruction, Convergent-Divergent Reading or Listening Tasks, Events, and Framegames.

3.1 Student-Led Research

Several courses in our English program involve students in independent and group research. Two examples from the first year are country research in Global Challenges and state research in American Studies. This research ties back into beliefs about AL as a process of students engaging in activities where they solve the research problems

themselves (CRLT, 2016) and where students strengthen their capacity to learn by doing (Claxton, 2007; Hargreaves, 2004). The task below, taken from the second-year European Studies course can be characterised as jigsaw learning, a cooperative learning technique by means of which students depend upon and coach each other to complete the assignment. In this case, students work as individuals, each searching for their own piece of the puzzle, and when they reconvene in the next class they come together in small groups to fill in the missing country information. Ultimately, the 28 countries of the EU make up the jigsaw in its entirety. For L2 learners, the task requires careful scaffolding under the supervision and direction of the instructor, with specific goals to be achieved. It is highly suitable for a content-based course such as European Studies, where students need to exchange real-world information (i.e. a content outcome) about countries that the instructor cannot cover in the limited class time available. Here we have included excerpts of the course goals and country-research related lesson plan.

European Studies
Week 1: Course Outline - Course Goals
ES aims to provide you with a broad understanding of Europe-related themes, while helping you to develop your English language capability (reading, writing and vocabulary) and critical thinking skills. Upon completion of the course, you will demonstrate the ability to... (4) conduct country-specific research and present findings to the class...

Week 1: Lesson Plan
 (iv) 25 mins. Organise class into country experts and coach on what is expected
[Interpersonal task, e.g. structured team project, coaching, video analysis]
Brainstorm 2 lists: (20) EU & (20) non-EU European countries (i.e. exact number of students in class). Randomly assign each student one from each list.

(vi) 5 mins. Review today's class and explain assignment.
What to include in country overview presentations: Images and text (e.g. a first time visitor to any country at the very least would need greetings, name of capital city, places of interest, popular food, and don't miss facets of that country). Partners will take notes and give feedback.
[Psychomotor task, e.g. practice of skill with feedback, arranging sequences in order, interactive video demos, pictures]

After class Prepare a 3-minute overview of your two countries - due on Day 2 of the course. 3 slides (title & image) for each country is enough, with a transcript of what you are going to say. Slide images and transcript go into your e-portfolio for submission. Be sure to reflect on something you found out about the

countries that interests you.

[Affective task: goal-setting, reflective journal, one-to-one meetings]

We would like to highlight that the transcript and small group presentations, submitted as part of an e-portfolio, focus on language fluency and complexity (i.e. a language outcome). The learning domains of *interpersonal*, *psychomotor*, *affective* (listed above in the lesson plan) within the student-led, *cognitive* (problem-based) activity bring together the LOTS by asking for a country overview (what we know about it) and the HOTS by asking about the features that single the country out (why that knowledge would be important for us to know).

3.2 Genre Approach to Writing Development

One of the biggest changes we have adopted for the CUBE English program has been a move away from implicit, process writing instruction to a focus on the explicit, staged, genre-based approach. Genre-based pedagogy, stemming from Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1985), targets the connection between reading and writing, the social purpose of writing, and the audience to whom we write. Students who lack an understanding of what kinds of whole texts we write, why we write them, who the writer of a particular text is, what the writer is trying to achieve, and how the writer goes about convincing the reader, learn to deconstruct texts with the eye of an expert. By identifying the text structure and language particular to each genre with the help of the instructor, students learn to co-construct and later individually construct complete texts comparable to those written by first language speakers. This follows on from the advice (Reeve, 2012) to put in place the right kind of support for student engagement and motivation to blossom. Reading and writing become *active* pursuits with the right kind of scaffolding, helping learners develop the resources (TLRP, 2006) they need to flourish in social and educational settings. A writing task typical of the biographical recount genre, introduced in American Studies (see lesson plan excerpts below), would thus be categorized as encouraging, practicing or developing LOTS, where the learner is remembering or recalling and thinking about things they already know (facts about a famous American who they have already researched for homework).

Week 2

Recount - Introduction (45 min)

      a.   *Present Recount framework information AS 02 Recount Genre PowerPoint*

b. *Stds watch bio video on a famous person AS 02 Steve Jobs Biography Video.mp4*

i. *Stds use AS 02 Recount Overview to take notes on video*

ii. *Go over the basic points of the Recount with the students so that they are aware of what is expected of their own writings*

Individual Research Practice (15 min)

c. *Sdts draw a name from AS 02 List of Famous Americans*

d. *Sdts will need to make an outline of that individual's biography and share it with members of their group in following classes*

e. *Stds should try to research information online from a variety of sources but usually starting from Google (in English), using Wikipedia (in English) and other sources*

f. *Research should be completed for Homework*

Assigned

Find out about one famous American and note down events in life story in Sdts' own words

○ *Sdts should also bring printed electronic research (research should go into Class Notes)*

Week 3

Research Sharing (20 min)

a. *Stds get into groups and share information about the famous person that they researched in AS 02 and for homework*

i. *Stds who listen should be taking notes to help them complete their Class Notes*

Jigsaw Reading (20 min)

b. *Stds get into groups of 3 and each student receives a different biography AS 03 Ella Fitzgerald Bio / AS 03 Michael Jackson Bio / AS 03 Walt Disney Bio*

c. *Stds read the biography for 10 mins and annotate/take notes so that they can explain the biography (without looking at the paper) to their partners*

d. *(optional) Students get into groups based on who the read in order to confirm their notes and better prepare to retell the biographies*

e. *In groups, students try to re-tell the biographies of the famous people to their partners*

i. *Again, sdts who are listening to biographies they have not read should take notes*

Recount - Model AS 03 Steve Jobs Biography Model (20 min)

f. *Elicit target grammar from AS 02 Recount Genre Powerpoint notes*

i. *Past tense action verbs / Adjectives / 3rd person voice*

g. *Go over parts of Recount*

h. *Stds look at AS 03 Steve Jobs Biography Model to find examples of the points that were elicited/discussed above*

By contrast, when asking a learner to apply HOTS in the L2, involving the kind of creative thinking needed to produce imaginative ideas from previous knowledge, a common written task would involve mastering the argument, or persuasive genre. This text type would only be introduced in a third semester course, including both European Studies and Japan Studies. The CUBE English program introduces text types in an overlapping progression running from LOTS to HOTS, with frequent repetition.

3.3 Convergent-Divergent Tasks

The basic premise of these tasks is that groups of students are assigned a whole text to read or listen to outside of class, discuss what they read/listened to with other students who were assigned the same text, prepare a briefing sheet, and finally give a presentation to students who were assigned different texts. By briefing sheet, we mean a one-page, bullet-point synopsis. Learners perform this task type twice in the third-semester Japan Studies course: First, with short videos produced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of the series titled *Fascinating Diversity*; then later with short biographies of famous Japanese business people. We include here notes from the lesson plans for weeks five, six and seven where the convergent-divergent task is used with the biographies.

Week 5

Explain Homework (10 min.)

- *Groups of 3 or 4 choose a biography to read for homework (links on Moodle).*
- *Read your group's biography (links on Moodle), highlight main ideas, underline supporting ideas/examples.*Stress to students that Day 06 activity requires that everyone has read their biography and highlighted main ideas.*

Week 6

Biography Worksheet & Briefing Sheet (25-30 min.)

- *Teacher introduces how to deconstruct (breaking down paragraphs, examining main ideas and supporting information, overall flow of paragraphs, etc.). In groups, students go through their biography, compare highlights. The goal is to prepare a one--page briefing sheet that individual students will use next week to introduce their famous Japanese business person.*

Week 7

Presentations with Briefing Sheets (50 min.)

- *Students with different biographies make groups and take turns introducing their business person. Other students take* <u>*Cornell Style Notes*</u> *(studied in AS) to help them prepare for next week's test.*

We see these types of activities as a way to promote both (1) the academic engagement discussed earlier (Newmann, Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992) and (2) the type of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of class content discussed in the CRLT (2016) report.

3.4 Events

Two of our guiding principles in designing the CUBE English language curriculum were (1) making the content of the classes relevant to learners with real-life applications, and (2) planning events that extend beyond the classroom. Both of these principles align well with our concepts of learner engagement and active learning as well as with the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) principle of learning within the community. One of our attempts in this area is a Company Expo that has been developed as part of the third-semester Business Communications course. Briefly, this is an ongoing project where groups of students choose and research a company in a specific industry, and then prepare and give short talks on different aspects of the company such as finance, human resources, marketing and sales. An excerpt of the teachers' notes is included here to provide some context.

***CUBE Business Communications Company Expo** (20%)*
Teacher Notes

Overview
The guiding premise is for student to be doing things that are closely related to the real world. The teacher's role is to support and set the students up for success with skills development through the tasks, and activities as well as content from the book.

What: Company Expo

Who: Company teams of 4-5 students with an audience of students from their own class & other classes from the same scheduled BC class time slot

When: Regular BC class period in Week 8 = middle of the term or so and at the end of Q2

Where: The 4 regular assigned classrooms for BC classes, 2F

Why: To bring together the communication skills and research they have been doing about companies, jobs/organizational chart, and products and services in a practical, real world activity

How: A low-tech, poster presentation similar to a convention or trade fair with 2-3 groups from one classroom presenting at the same time for 8 minutes (plus 2 min for questions) and doing this 4 times with only the audience moving and taking notes. Then repeat with the other 2-3 groups.

We recognize of course the necessity for proper scaffolding and support if these types of events are to meet the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness.

3.5 Framegames

Several ideas for energizing English classes at CUBE have been adopted from Thiagarajan & Thiagarajan (2000). Sivasailam 'Thiagi' Thiagarajan describes Framegames as a "game that is deliberately designed to permit the easy switching of content" and that "can be applied to a wide variety of topics." As one example, we offer here the teachers' notes for an activity called Envelopes that we use in our first-semester course CUBE English I. This Framegame is used on the first day of class to introduce some main themes of the course and to clarify class rules.

Two key elements of ENVELOPES are:
- two or more teams solve the same problem
- another team compares and evaluates the different solutions

a. Organize students into five groups, brief the participants, distribute the stimulus envelopes and blank response cards, conduct the first round (give students 5-7 minutes to discuss, write their answers, and then place their response card inside the envelope).
(Prompts for Stimulus Envelopes)
- What are 5 study habits that will help students succeed at university?
- What are 5 rules for students in CUBE English?
- What are 5 rules for teachers in CUBE English?
- What are 5 ways to improve our English outside of class?

- What are 5 things students should be able to do in English by the end of semester one?

b. End the first round, pass envelopes to the next group, repeat procedure (DO NOT LOOK at the other team's answers).

c. After each group has answered 3 questions, the envelopes (with 3 response cards) are passed on, the next group evaluates the answers by dividing 100 points among 3 cards (ex. 50 - 30 - 20).

d. Ask the teams to announce the results, identify winning teams, debrief (what was interesting, difficult and/or useful)?

We see this type of activity as aligning well with the description of active learning provided above by the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Teaching Center (Columbia University, 2016), namely when learners are (1) mentally involved, (2) engaged in hands-on activities, and/or (3) involved in a process of inquiry, discovery, investigation, and interpretation. At the same time, we feel that this type of problem-based activity and negotiation of meaning should help strengthen learners' "capacity" to learn (Claxton, 2007), but also understand the limitations of minimal guidance discussed by Kirschner and colleagues (2006).

4.   Conclusion

We hope the above discussion will stimulate dialog on the topic of AL among colleagues at Konan and beyond. We recognize that we have brushed over some topics or themes for the sake of brevity, but intend this paper only as a discussion starter. So where does this all leave us? Basically, we can make three tentative observations about how AL has functioned in the EFL classes.

Firstly, there has be some concern over where the current emphasis on AL within the institution has come from, and how appropriate it is to have prioritized AL over other pedagogical considerations in EFL. When AL is construed by instructors as merely a top-down buzzword of the moment, imposed by those higher up in a distant ministry or the upper echelons of the university administration, then it is easily mistrusted, resisted, misunderstood, misapplied, or ignored. Even were it to replace something else in the curriculum, the concern is that AL might push out what is working perfectly well. Arguably, the well-intentioned decision (at our institution) to send out a survey to instructors asking them for details of how they apply AL in their classes, and how often, is fraught with danger. Teachers may feel under pressure to change the way they conduct their classes to suit the heavy-handed administrative request, with a consequential loss of confidence and undermining of classroom practices which have

been working perfectly well. Alternatively, they might feel threatened by authority and falsely report that they are applying AL when in fact they are not. Many, but by no means all, full-time instructors have been involved in discussions and workshops on AL, but the same cannot be said for part-time lecturers. Once AL is decided upon, then there is a need for follow-up, but this would require classroom observations of all teachers to monitor the progress of AL, before and after its implementation. It is unlikely that a policy instituted at the top by those who spend little time in the classroom would ever be executed in practice. Specifically when referring to EFL instruction, it is hard to imagine that what constitutes AL has not already been common practice for decades.

This leads on to the second observation, which is to ask what is essentially new or different about AL in the context of EFL. Given the limited time and resources available to faculty, it has to be asked whether AL is the area deserving of so much attention. Returning to the literature review above, the CRLT definition of AL (CRLT, 2016) of engaging in discussion or activities that support some kind of judgment regarding the content of the class would hardly represent a controversial or innovative approach that had never been conceived of before. More troubling is the pressure to focus on AL to the detriment or exclusion of other tried and tested classroom procedures. Busy teachers might struggle to understand recommendations (Claxton, 2007) to shift from assisting students to learn to an emphasis on firming up their capacity to learn. Such a major conceptual leap, it is argued here, has to take place at several levels above the classroom, and then framed in language that is much more straightforward and easy to implement. In our experience, constructivist, inquiry-based and discovery-based techniques that fall under certain definitions of AL are likely inappropriate for the kinds of EFL learners we encounter in the context of our English program in Japan. We have offered what we consider as a more productive line of inquiry by extending the discussion beyond AL and into learner engagement, L2 learning motivation, and SDT.

The third observation is that given the problematic nature of AL vis-a-vis EFL teaching, one has to wonder just how robust AL is as a construct. AL is variously described as a method, an approach, a process, and a host of other things. Simply put, it is a mismatched collection of ideas that suffers from a central unifying idea and is beset by internal contradictions. Within our EFL program, we adopt the best practices that we know to work, and ignore the others that are unhelpful. As discussed above, we approve of the cooperative learning in *student-led research*, the whole text focus in *the genre approach to writing development*, the staged and scaffolded approach inherent to *convergent-divergent tasks*, the link to real life learning in *events*, and the energizing

approach typified by *framegames*. We can certainly characterise these elements as forming AL if we like, but this realisation does not necessarily change the way we teach. None of this disproves the efficacy of AL, but neither does AL add to best practices that EFL teachers would follow even without the nomenclature. It can be asserted that AL is an attempt to come up with a cogent analysis of effective teaching methods or practices or processes, but it struggles to offer a trenchant criticism of past practices when many of them are already obsolete. In the EFL environment with which the two authors of this paper are most familiar, the lecture style has not been mainstream for some considerable time. Hence when we talk about AL in Japanese university EFL classes, we may be talking about an argument that was already resolved some time ago, and which most instructors have already moved on from.

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Appendix - SDT Micro Theories (Source: Reeve, 2012)